

## **Who Are These People Anyway?**

a sermon by

The Rev. Bryan Jessup

The Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Bayside, California

Sunday September 15, 2013

**Reading** done by David Harris

The Reading this morning is adapted from Kate Wolf -

Here we are at last again, reaching out across the room  
Quietly the light shines in and the sailors reach the harbor  
Look at us sailing in, decks awash, but still afloat. And now the wind comes up to rock  
us on the water.

We're riding out the storm like a ship safe at anchor - Waiting out the long voyage,  
'Round the cape of hope we'll take her

In the calm before the storm, there were sunny days and smoother waters  
And when the wind blew fair, well, we set our sails and we caught her.  
Just look into my eyes, Let me see where you've been sailing  
'Cause like you I've felt the storm and I've heard those wild waves wailing

We're riding out the storm like a ship safe at anchor - Waiting out the long voyage,  
'Round the cape of hope we'll take her

Steer clear of the shore, because the coast is rough and rocky  
Choose the deepest channels because they run most true,  
And choose the brightest stars to guide her..  
Then steady as she goes, because there's no turning back the sailors  
And with the ship on course and the sea winds fair, why, there's no need to fail her.

We're riding out the storm like a ship safe at anchor - Waiting out the long voyage,  
'Round the cape of hope we'll take her

**Hymn** - Please stand now as you are willing and able – and join in singing Hymn #145  
– “As Tranquil Streams”

## Sermon Part #1 by Bryan Jessup

I want to preface my remarks to you this morning by bowing in honor of the complexity of life. Things are rarely simple.

As a congregation, you folks have not called me to be your minister. After being suggested to your Board by Pacific Central District Staff, Edie and I came up to Humboldt for an interview in December and I was hired by your Board in to come to work in mid August and here I am.

So well you may wonder who I am, who Edie is and what the heck your Board has done to you. Edie and I hope to answer some of your questions today by letting you know a little about ourselves.

We want to get to know about you too and we expect we will have a lot in common. But none of us should underestimate the inevitable complexity of things. Our stories as human beings are all a little different, aren't they?

One of the great strengths of Unitarian Universalism – on paper – is that as we center on our UU Principles we do expect diversity. In the Covenant of our National Association we declare - The Living Tradition we share draws from - - Many Sources!!

But while that declaration is true on paper – we know in practice that we UUs struggle as much as anyone else when it comes to genuinely accepting people who are different from us. Deep listening - true welcoming and acceptance of one another takes a lot of work and courage - and patience.

So I invite your work and courage sisters and brothers – because even though I don't intend to, I am sure that from time to time I will try your patience

But not to worry. I am not trying to convert you to my religious style. In fact, I am very interested that each of you develop your own unique style and approach. I am very interested that you grow your own hearts and minds in your own way. Then... as Edie and I share life with you during this year – I believe we will come to a true appreciation of the many things we have in common and the many ways in which we are different.

After all – though all flowers need sunlight, water and soil, if every flower in the garden needed them in the same exact way, and bloomed in the same exact way, it would be kind of boring.

Let me begin by saying that as a garden of diverse you diverse Humboldt UU people look beautiful and healthy to Edie and me. We've been involved in Unitarian Universalist ministry for a long time and what we look for in a congregation is people who are dedicated and for whom love and justice are central, and for whom a little humor and self awareness lighten the load.

We see those qualities in you – and it doesn't hurt at all that you are located in one of the most beautiful spots on earth. It doesn't hurt at all that you have empowered yourselves to create beautiful, healing worship services – and that you strive to serve your wider community and world with steady social justice efforts. It doesn't hurt at all that you have a great music program, a strong commitment to religious education and a proven ability to build beautiful and useful buildings – even though you kind of consistently underestimate how large they need to be.

Your commitment to one another in supportive, welcoming, long-enduring religious community is impressive. Since 1954 you've been bringing your generous hearted, open minded way of religion to this county. – Your fellowship staff right now with Shay and Jillian, Annette and Elisabeth and Levi, Jacob and Jenn, Connor and Elika – is skilled, dedicated and impressive. Your Board leadership and Board members are as good as any I have ever experienced.

That does not mean that life is a breeze for you. And I know you as individuals and you as a congregation are not perfect. I know you are kind of tired right now and (who knows, maybe even a little cranky.) I know as individuals and as a group, you have your own growing edges. But so do I, so does Edie. And that's what we're here to work on together. To go out to our growing edges grow our spirits and heal our hearts and form encouraging, welcoming, effective religious community and serve the world around us.

So let me tell you a little about myself as your new partner in this project and Edie will tell you a little about herself. And our sharing will start the ball rolling on what we hope will be a great and enduring conversation between us all.

One of the titles for my spiritual journey so far might well be - "From those to whom much has been given – much will be required."

I am a white male – in a white male dominated society in a country with the strongest white male military and white male economy the world has ever known.

Sure my people were simple farmers and business owners who suffered during the Great Depression. Sure I was not a Kennedy or a Rockefeller. But I was born into a system that was made for white people in general and white males in particular. And I got my tuition paid to Stanford University on the strength of that. My friend Tito Hinojosa didn't go to Stanford. He was just as smart as I was – but he was a poor Mexican American so he went to Vietnam.

Both my parents were college educated. Sure we drove an old car and lived in a simple farm house. Sure we did not have television when I was growing up. Sure we did not have a shower – just a bath tub on the farm. Sure I did not have a bedroom. I slept year round on a screen porch. I did not have a desk of my own but we went to the library regularly. We had regular family reading and discussion time. My mother was a musician who played cello in the Tulare County symphony. My father loved to take us to plays in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Talk about unique religious language.... I can sing you most of the songs from most of the Broadway musicals from 1950 through 1970 – with a little Gilbert and Sullivan in between.

In comparison to lives before mine on this planet and in comparison to billions of lives being lived today – my life has been a life of privilege. And I am very, very grateful. I am not asking for more pain than I have already had.

But here's the rub. I was raised by parents of conscience and heart. They let me know from the beginning that I had responsibility in the web of life to myself, to my family, to other people and to the earth.

Their religious language was Rural Christian and I got my share of hellfire and damnation sitting in Baptist and Nazarene churches growing up. But my parents were not 100% literalists – and they taught me that the most important thing about loving Jesus was to try to act like him.

They taught me that Jesus really does love the little children – all the children of the world. They taught me that I should love all the little children of the world too.

And I believed that – because (though I had my share of pains and struggles and though my mom and dad were tremendously human and imperfect) I was loved mightily by my them and grandparents. And my friends were loved by their parents too. And in school and in Boy Scouts, we were taught by people who loved us and told us that our lives mattered – and that living lives of love and integrity mattered.

That, sisters and brothers - That was a true gift. Being loved and cared for – even imperfectly is a true gift. And from those to whom much has been given – much will be required.

When I was six years old, in an evening service at the First Baptist Church in Porterville, I gave my heart to Jesus and his way of Loving Kindness and I was filled with a warmth and light and love that was a reflection of the abundant love and care I had been showered with all my life. Thank goodness that light and warmth has never ever entirely left me.

Of course, my understanding of that warmth and light has evolved and broadened over the years.

When I was in high school, I moved beyond the narrow bonds of rigid Christian dogma and practice. I had a great high school English teacher that, among other things, introduced me and my classmates to the Transcendentalists who had their own understanding of love and light. I recognized the light and love in the Transcendentalists and - with a new nature-based, total universe kind of freedom - they set my heart on fire!

I read Emerson who said: Give all to love. Obey your heart. Friends, kindred, fame, good credit and the muse. Nothing refuse. It is a brave master so let it have scope!"

I wanted to do that very thing. It became clear to me that my devotion to Jesus was not a devotion to his divinity – but to his amazing humanity – to his brave, liberating teaching – to his Great Commandment of Love and his tremendous integrity and courage.

I know a lot of people, including Unitarian Universalists have been truly injured by evangelical energy and horrible things done in the name of Jesus – so right now I want to assure you I am not selling my evangelical energy or Jesus or my particular eclectic mix of religious metaphors or practice. I'm not even selling the Transcendentalists. I'm just sharing my experience and inviting you to begin to share yours.

I am inviting you to hear me as much as you can. And I am promising that I will do my very best to hear you – and hear about how life has gone for you as you have tried to honor the flame of life in your heart and embody the Principles of our faith in your actions.

When I was in college, I read William Ellery Channing's sermon on Unitarian Christianity and I said to myself – O my goodness. I'm not a Baptist. I'm a Unitarian. Later I read Theodore Parker's sermon called The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity. In that sermon Parker said that if Jesus had not even existed – what is true about the teachings attributed to him would still be true.

Wow! That resonated with me. And what is true about those teachings from my perspective – is that when we give our hearts to love and justice our lives become full and meaningful.

Here at the Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship – you have an Aspiration that says: May love be the spirit of this fellowship! I say – AMEN to that.

And the Principles of Unitarian Universalism spell out what we UUs think love requires of us. So we covenant to live lives of justice, equity and compassion – and we covenant to accept one another and encourage one another in spiritual growth because that's what it means to have love as our spirit.

We Unitarian Universalists bother to declare that we aspire to love and we bother to articulate what love means to us because truly evolving as love and justice bearers is no easy task.

I'm a privileged white guy in the most powerful white guy country in the world – and trying to grow as a love and justice bearer has been plenty hard for me.

On my journey, I've encountered my own fear and timidity and desire for security. I've encountered my own competitive white male ego and my own misogyny and racism and violence and homophobia . I've encountered the narrow, unhealthy doctrines of religion done badly both in conservative ways and in liberal ways. I've lived with the post traumatic stress of a WWII air to air combat veteran coming home after 61 strafing and bomber escort missions in a P51 Mustang – flying over France, Germany and the Low Lands.

I've seen family members bleeding on the floor from domestic violence and laying on the floor drunk with alcoholism and prescription pill addiction. I've buried a beloved cousin with AIDS and a beloved nephew who died from a heroin overdose.

I've been in the presence of chronic depression and bi-polar rages. I've dealt with my own depression and heart disease and cancer. Because my ministry took me to the

East Coast, I have suffered from the loss of day to day contact with my daughters as they grew up. I saw their suffering too. And felt it. I've dealt with my own rage that there is no God to stop Holocausts or to stop the killing in Syria – or to overcome the Huntington's Disease that is killing my sweet cousin Chris.. I've dealt with my own rage that if the world is ever going to be a better place, I've got to step up and you've got to step up to deal with the challenges.

Choosing to be a love and justice bearer may sound sweet – but it is no easy path to follow. And I bow to the complexity of it daily. Furthermore -- choosing to be a love and justice bearer certainly does not buy you or me indemnity from any of the potential catastrophes of life. And I know that truth.

But I truly believe that choosing love and justice is a choice worth making because it makes life worth living. With Victor Frankel – I truly believe that if we discover a WHY for living we can endure almost any HOW

Love and justice are my religion – sisters and brothers. And Unitarian Universalism, for me, is the way of faith that best equips me to grow as a love and justice bearer

Though in my life I've had a lot of experience with Jesus as a carrier of the Love and Justice message - I am actually metaphorically multi-lingual. I have also been greatly nurtured by Humanism and Buddhism and Nature Centered Practices and the Wisdom of the Tao.

The glorious freedom of Unitarian Universalism allows me and you to use many different kinds of language and follow many different practices –

It makes room for all of us as thinkers and feelers, meditators and social justice activists. It makes room for us as introverts and extroverts – quiet contemplators and exuberant fountains of wild poetry and song.

We all bloom a little differently as UUs. But our unifying Aspiration is that in our personal lives and in our fellowship – in private and in public – in our individual efforts and in our group efforts – Love will be the spirit of all we do...

Eddie and I, have both chosen to follow the way of love and justice as best we can in all we do. We are certainly not perfect at it – but we have learned a lot together. And we

will continue to learn – and we look forward over the years to learning a lot more with you in this beautiful place and this beautiful, diverse religious community.

Now I want you to hear from Edie in her own words what some of her journey has been like and what it means to her.

### **Edie's Remarks – “Who are these people?”**

Note: I am not your minister. I do hang out with him but I really am a very different person.

Regarding my spiritual journey, I am proud to be pilgrim on the the camino or the way of life. Bryan and I were literal pilgrims on El Camino de Santiago in Spain several years ago and that experience has never left me.

And now here I am with Bryan at this new “Alberge” or wayside hostel here in Humboldt County. And I'm glad to be here with him and you and we plan to stay a long time and call this place home.

I was born in Tulare County, California, on a dark and stormy night, and taken home to a tent at the Linnell Farm Labor Camp where my birth family lived. My birth family members were some of the last of the Okie - dust bowl folks. My birth father was a paratrooper in WWII who spent 18 months behind the enemy lines in France. He was a true hero of our nation. But when he came home – he was treated again like just another Okie. He did not take to that kindly nor did he behave well. Neither did my birth mother.

At 8 months old I was adopted out of that Labor Camp by Lee and Agnes Clearman – both college graduates. Both much more privileged than my birth parents. And though that, in many ways was sad, it was very good luck for me. I grew up as a beloved, long yearned for child in a large, extended tribe of good and fun loving people in the Central Valley. My adopted great grandparents settled a section of land there in the 1870s. My adopted parents themselves were both newspaper people. Then my father became a teacher and the Dean of Instruction at Porterville Community College. Seven years after I arrived – surprise, surprise my

adopted mom and dad had my brother John. Some of you met him. He is a very fun human being.

So my adoption was my 1<sup>st</sup> good fortune, my first adaptation to an ever-changing life, my first Alberge on the camino of my life. I would say that though I was very young, my early experience of change and adaptation to change was pattern setting for me. It made me deeply aware, even at an early age that change and choosing to truly be where I was, was important to me and that I would be enriched by embracing the world as I found it.

Religiously, I grew up in the Methodist Church in Porterville, Ca. I had some wonderful experiences there as a teen. I never felt oppressed. My parents kind of Methodism involved questioning and thoughtful answering. I later fell away from some of the Christian mythology. I was an exchange student to Japan between my Junior and Senior year in high school. That exposure to Buddhism, and Shinto and Japanese nature religion and culture affected me greatly. But I never was deeply injured by my Christian upbringing. I just grew to be much more nature centered and inclusive in my thought.

At Pomona College, in the 60's I found that peace and justice became closely associated with the core of my faith in life. I felt strongly moved to engage in the causes of the day. And for me my beliefs had to be expressed in actions. So I took part in Political Street Theatre, in protests, in SDS meetings and more. Some people distant to my college political action group set off a bomb on campus, and awakened me to my firm commitment to choose change tactics very carefully and to be very clear that I did not believe in ending violence by committing more violence.

After college, I married, had a child, Joshua, and traveled lots in the US and Mexico. I divorced after eleven years however. And that particular chapter of my life ended.

I still longed for commitment and family and interesting stories though. And as fate would have it I met Bryan and we merged our families while he was in seminary.

That was a very sweet stop on the Camino of my life. Bryan and I , Joshua, and Bryan's daughters Amy and Kate – all lived in a one room cabin on the hill next to the big UU Church in Berkeley. For 4 years, we all worked hard, learned to live together and love one another – and then... when Bryan got his first job as a UU minister in Delaware – learned painful lessons about letting go and feeling the pain yet embracing life as it appeared in new forms around us.

Bryan and I have had several stops on our Camino together. One in Delaware for two years. One in Maine for eleven. And most recently – for the last 15 years - in Fresno. Coming back home to the San Joaquin Valley as we did in 1998, we both got to be there for the last years of our fathers lives. And we got to be in California for the young adulthood of our children who all lived here at that time.

I was proud in the first part of Bryan's and my relationship to stay home and support the kids and the household. Anyone who thinks that is not worthy work or is not very demanding work simply does not understand what it truly takes to make a healthy home and raise children. I was really glad to be able to do that.

My professional work life started in earnest when Joshua was in high school and it developed strongly at York County Homeless Shelters Programs in Maine. In California I have been involved most in Hunger and Nutrition Advocacy work in the Central Valley with low income families. This work led me outside my old comfort zone. It lead me to seek justice locally and statewide at a policy and environmental change level. I am pleased I have had some success in that work and have been affirmed for efforts by receiving several local and statewide social action awards.

Bryan is a love centered minister and I support him in that and join him in that. But love in isolation is not enough. For me love is the starting place, but it has to be moved from our individual lives and our supportive communities of love – into the public arena. And there in the public arena, love is called justice.

Bryan's mantra "from those who have received much, much will be required - challenges me to take my education and my upbringing and my power into the public arena and work for systemic change.

Love as one-way charity (my bounty shared with those without) - as Jan Popenack who wrote *Sweet Charity* observed - is not effective or just. It leaves people whom I care about with the Seven Deadly 'Ins':

- Insufficiency,
- Inappropriateness,
- Inadequacy,
- Instability,
- Inaccessibility,
- Inefficiency, and
- Indignity.

My commitment to being a love bearer certainly begins in my own heart and then it flows into my family and home – But it also calls me to engage systems and environments so people can be honored for who they are and can grow into being who they can truly be.

I was adopted out of Linnell Farm Labor Camp – and I didn't know my birth mother and father or my birth siblings very well – but I have not forgotten them. Or the injustices they suffered.

My life and my faith have been regularly challenged by stingy, power-broker myths of scarcity. My life and faith have been challenged by people who want to individualize poverty and racism and addictions and obesity and mental illness.

My faith has taken me beyond my comfort zone, but when I have stood up, and personally challenged the injustice that surrounds us all, I have reinforced my belief in the potential of goodness in all people and my belief that both nature and nurture are involved whenever we are growing people.

My chosen faith Unitarian Universalism has supported me in both being a love bearer and in my intensity around social change. It has supported me in my development and assured me that there are others on this amazing Camino of life with great heart and great effectiveness.

My friend Kamal Abu Shamsieh is one of those. He was the director of the Islamic Cultural Center in Fresno when we first got there and part of the Central California Interfaith Alliance that Bryan and I engaged with. Now he is working at Stanford to start a nationwide Muslim Hospital Chaplaincy. But in 2001, after 9-11, unbeknownst to him, he was investigated by the FBI and Homeland Security. Two young agents came to my place of work looking for Bryan because he was co-chair of the Interfaith Alliance and we knew Kamal. Bryan was gone at the time – so the agents (flipping their badges) asked me about Kamal. I said – “He makes a wicked babaganoush!” (they dutifully wrote that down) They were not amused and told me not to tell Kamal or anyone about their investigation.

So I called Kamal when they left and told him that he and others connected to the Islamic Cultural Center were being investigated, specifically around Muslim charity contributions. Later he called the local FBI and asked them to come over to the Islamic Cultural Center and give a presentation to the people. The Regional head of the FBI came – and in front of everyone Kamal asked what American Muslims could do to be safe from the FBI, and still contribute to charity, as required by Islam. What list of charities did the USA think were terrorist? Because surely the American Muslims did not want to donate to terrorist organizations. The agent told the gathering that if he told them which charities were suspect by Homeland Security, then the FBI couldn't arrest people or catch people who donated to terrorist organizations; and would not give a list of OK charities.

After the event, Kamal asked to speak to the FBI director in his office. Before Kamal said anything, The Agent said, "I know what this is all about. Kamal asked what? And the agent said – well it's about the Jessup's. What about the Jessup's Kamal asked. And the agent said – well they are Unitarian Universalists. What does that mean? Kamal asked. And the agent said – that means they are anti-government. Kamal said – No. I think you don't have that quite right. I think Unitarian Universalists are anti-oppression.

Well – I think Unitarian Universalists are anti-oppression too. I think when our love deepens and grows it asks us to be anti-oppression. And, in a growing and deepening way, that is what I hope to be all of my life.

I am unsure right now if I will step out into community work here in Humboldt soon if I or will stay 'retired' for a while. I've been in the battlefield a long time and I have some health and healing to catch up on. I also have some artistic yearnings I want to pay attention to.

But I am very happy to be with you, my fellow pilgrims, as I engage in this discernment process. I am happy to be a part of this community of love bearing, justice seeking Humboldt Heretics.

It's been a privilege to share with you just a bit about where I am myself – And I can't wait to find out where you are too and to get know you better, and see what kind of world we might create together.

**Q and A** – We have time now for just a few questions and/or reflections.

**Closing Hymn** – I invite you to stand now for the Closing Hymn and remain standing for the Closing Words and Closing Song.

**Closing Hymn - #113 – Where is Our Holy Church**

**Closing Words** – Adapted from Kate Wolf

Steer clear of the shore, for the coast is rough and rocky.  
Choose the deepest channels because they run most true and choose the  
brightest stars to guide her.

Then – steady as she goes for there's no turning back the sailors  
But with the ship on course and the sea winds fair – Why there's no need to fail  
her.

We're riding out the storm – like a ship safe at anchor. We're waiting out the long  
voyage – Round the Cape of Hope we'll take her.

**Closing Song** – I now invite you –as it feels right to you sit down and hold hands with  
one another as the Choir sings us a Song for Leaving.

**Go in Peace** -